Report on A Trip to Cuba

Fidel Castro Bringing About A Humane and Gentle But Genuine Social Transformation

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Not A Revolution Imposed From Above

I came back from Cuba tremendously impressed with what I saw. I believe Fidel Castro and his able group of young associates are bringing about a social revolution of an admirably humane quality with amazing swiftness and order, that they deserve the esteem felt for them by the masses all over Latin America, and that the reestablishment of friendly relations with Castro's Cuba would do more than a "Marshall Plan" to win the hearts of our Latin American neighbors.

Though I know only a few words of Spanish and spent little more than a week in Cuba, I brought some useful perspectives to the scene. I have gone many times to the underdeveloped Middle East. I have been in such poor countries as Mexico and Italy and India. I have also seen a little of the Soviet States and of Yugoslavia. By comparison with the Soviet States, and even Tito's, there is in Cuba an atmosphere of popular enthusiasm and participation which reflects a deep grass roots support the Communist States do not enjoy; Castro's is not a revolution imposed from above by a minority on a recalcitrant peasantry and a cowed intelligentsia. By comparison with the hysterical demogogy of the Arab States and the phoney Leftist oratory of Mexico, the Cuban leadership seems sober and restrained. Except for the absence of a multi-party press and a multi-party politics, Cuba seemed most like Israel in its ebullience. The cooperatives in the countryside, the devoted technicians in the government, reminded me strongly of *Eretz*. The young soldiers and the friendly public attitude toward them recalled the Haganah rather than the Pretorian mercenaries familiar in Latin American dictatorships.

Havana Safer Than New York

I was in Cuba once during the middle 30's and again in the late 40's. This time what struck me first of all in that lovely country was the order. I saw few policemen and except in front of a few public buildings even fewer soldiers. I was accosted only twice by beggars, one of them an old lady known as The Duchess who seems to survive as a kind of national institution. The pimps are still there and the prostitutes but they do not swarm all over the place as in former years. There are no signs of inflation; prices in the shopwindows are about the same as the United States; my remaining pesos were exchanged for dollars at the airport bank when I left. Only once was I offered black market money exchange on the streets. Though my accent and clothes marked me a Yankee and the streets are decorated with banners against U.S. policy, at no time did I encounter any unpleasantness. The Cubans are the least xenophobiac people I have ever seen. Americans can walk about at night in Havana far more safely than in certain sections of New York.

I saw a bit of the slums, urban and rural, of Cuba; I saw the toothless children and the telltale marks of parasites. But by comparison with the underdeveloped countries of the Middle East and overpopulated India, Cuba seems rich, rich in water, grass, soil, climate and resources. By comparison with other Latin American countries, she seems favored too in being a nation; there are no unassimilated communities of *Indios* in her hinterland, speaking no Spanish, cut off from the rest of the community, as in Guatemala or even in Mexico. Cuba has a people united by a common language, by the remembrance of past struggles against Spaniard and North American, with common traditions and heroes. Though color consciousness and discrimination have not altogether disappeared, the Negro is not a man apart in Cuba, but fully of the Cuban nation. The banners that proclaim "Patria o Muerte" (Our country or death) are more than rhetoric, as one can see in the serious faces of the workers doing their militia drill after hours. By comparison with many other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Cuba has a high rate of literacy, a large and growing number of technicians, a considerable middle class, and a high level of sanitation. Cleanliness indeed is almost a fetish with Cubans and at least in Havana I found I could eat at the street stalls and drink freshly squeezed fruit juice without the dysentery almost unavoidable even in the best hotels of Egypt and of Mexico. Highly urbanized, with an industrialized agriculture, Cuba—given peace—has assets for quick development most other "backward" countries would envy. The Cuban *campesino* is at a much higher stage of consciousness than the Mexico peon and a long distance from the Egyptian *fellah*. In Fidel Castro, he has found a leader unequalled in Latin America since Mexico's Indians produced their own compassionate and brooding Lincoln in Juarez.

How Different It Looks Through Communist Eyes

While there are Americans who regard Cuba as practically a Communist State, to the Communist bloc newspapermen who

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Castro on Communism

"I am not a Communist, and neither is the revolutionary movement communistic, but we do not need to say we are not Communist just to fawn on foreign powers. Why is the phantom of Communism raised now? We are expected to persecute Communists. Why should we? Do we persecute Catholics or Rotarians . . . ?

"Capitalism may kill man with hunger. Communism kills man by wiping out his freedom. Cuba has a revolution that satisfied man's material needs without sacrificing his freedom."

—Castro in mid-July of 1959 when he forced Urrutia out of the Presidency after the latter made a statement against Communism in Cuba. Quoted from Ray Brennan's book, Castro, Cuba and Justice, p. 281.

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were arriving for the celebration in the Sierra Maestra July 26 Cuba must look quite conventionally *bourgeois.* Heretical works like Djilas's *The New Class* in Spanish translation are prominent in the book store windows. The busts to be found everywhere are not of Marx or Engels but of José Marti, the outstanding leader of the revolt against Spain and the ideological patron saint of the Castro revolution. Shop windows display items like $100 straw hats which only the very rich could afford. The fashionable restaurants are well filled at lunch. In the American Club on the Prado, they still throw dice on the bar in lordly sahib fashion to see who shall pay for the drinks. In luxurious Miramar, where the rich live in Miami-style opulence, the Biltmore Yacht Club has been turned over to the proletariat—on the basis that Batista put $800,000 of public money into building it—but the nearby Havana Yacht Club is still the private preserve of Havana's oldest and most snobbish families. At the Havana Yacht Club, which now boasts that Batista never succeeded in gaining membership, a servant in livery opens the door of one's car and a guide from the Foreign Ministry (herself a member, by old family connections) takes one through the luxuriously cool marble halls to the private beach crowded with the children of Havana's best families, their mamas and their nursemaids, safe from vulgar eyes.

The Proletariat Can Even Play Golf

If the social revolution looks very gentle at the Havana Yacht Club, it looks nonetheless real at the rival equally affluent Biltmore Yacht Club a few blocks away. Over its Moorish columns big banners proclaim "unity", "fatherland or death" and "we shall prevail." Inside the bulletin board announces prices within the reach of all. Admission to the club and beach is 50 cents weekdays and $1 on week-ends. Towel and soap is 20 cents. Boats can be rented at 40 cents an hour while golf is available at $1.50 an hour. Those with incomes of less than $100 a month can buy a family membership at $2 a month. Those with incomes above $100 a month pay $3. When it was a private club, it had 1,600 members. Now it has 22,000. There is no racial discrimination and framed on the wall near the entrance are Marti's words: "There are no black Cubans or white Cubans. There are only Cubans."

The administrator, a gentleman in a beret from the Gastronomical Workers Union, made a little speech of welcome and introduced me to his assistant, the first *barbudo* I met in Cuba, a Nicaraguan exile named Alfonso Salomon whose father was an Arab from Jerusalem. Salomon walked with a slight limp from a bullet wound suffered while fighting with Fidel Castro. "When we triumph," he said of his own Nicaraguan comrades, "to whom will we be grateful? We can't get near the U.S. Embassy. They call us Communists." Salomon proudly showed us the yacht basin of the club with several abandoned yachts being overhauled. "Fidel," he said, "wants us to put these yachts in shape and enter them in the annual regatta on behalf of the club just as it used to do." To talk to this *barbudo* with his scraggly beard and fiery eyes was to believe oneself back in the Nineteenth Century of Garibaldi and the Latin America of Conrad and O. Henry. "They can kill us," he said, speaking of the U.S. military intervention which so many seem to fear, "but they can never kill the idea for which we stand." This, too, seemed like a naive echo of Mid-Victorian optimism, a refreshing breeze from an earlier time before the H-bomb made us fear that men and ideas alike might be destroyed forever in one holocaust.

Why U. S. Radicals Like Cuba

Perhaps one reason for the euphoria that seems to engulf North American radicals in Cuba, whether from the violently anti-Communist *New Leader* sector on the "right" to the Trotzkyites of *The Militant* on the far Left, is that Cuba offers an escape from problems of the nuclear arms race, which often seem insoluble. To visit Cuba is to step into a simpler world of relatively easy challenges—illiteracy, bad housing, seasonal unemployment, one-crop agriculture, and the need for industrialization. The Cuban revolution is refreshing in another respect. For almost two decades we have lived in a stale atmosphere of Fifth Amendment radicalism; no one is a Communist, few admit themselves Socialists, nobody owns up to reading Marx and practically everybody on the Left claims only to be a liberal, nothing more; the word "radical" is avoided as a bad word. It is refreshing to step from this world of phonies to a land in which the leader is a man who has never hidden his intentions; who announced to Batista in advance just what he was going to do; who proudly avowed his revolutionary aims. Nothing else could prove so certainly to the politically sophisticated that Fidel is not a Communist.

As a social revolutionist, Fidel is pragmatic rather than doctrinaire. In this he strongly resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt, except that operating in a poorer country Fidel is more socialistic and U.S. pressure, by putting the economic squeeze on him, has been pushing him further Left. For one who remembers the New Deal as I do, there was a nostalgically familiar atmosphere in the institutes for agrarian reform and for savings and housing, and in the departments of education, and social welfare. Talking with officials one found the same zeal and devotion that marked New Deal Washington. One felt that Fidel has saved a whole generation of Cubans from despair and given them a means to serve their people. In education, the number of classrooms and teachers has doubled and the number of pupils in school has risen from 600,000 to 1,000,000. New hospitals are going up all over the island. I visited a model prison for juvenile delinquents and a voluntary home for wayward girls, established in the rich country villa of a Batista collaborator who fled the country. The Agrarian Reform Institute has established some 1500 cooperatives and some 2,000 people's stores. I visited three of these cooperatives and hope to write more of them in a second issue on Cuba. This Institute, known as INRA from its initials in Spanish, has taken over not only the lands but the businesses of those found guilty of misappropriating public funds and of "war crimes" against the people of Cuba under Batista. It is the main instrument of Cuban socialization.

The Demonstration Outside the Cathedral

Perhaps my most interesting experience was to see the anti-Soviet demonstration outside the Cathedral in Havana on Sunday, July 17. I believe I was the only foreign correspondent there. It was my first Sunday in Cuba. I had started out by bus from the rich residential section of the Vedado to spend a day roaming around old Havana. We had been winding for some time through cool narrow streets just wide enough for one bus when suddenly women began pounding on the sides

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of our bus screaming "Cuba, si" (Cuba, yes) and something else I was unable to catch. I jumped off the bus and pushed my way through the crowd to a tiny square, on one side of which stands the ancient Cathedral of Havana. Worshippers pouring out from mass were demonstrating on the steps with shouts of "Cuba, si; Russia, no" (Cuba yes; Russia, no).* A young man rushed up to me when he saw me taking notes and screamed excitedly, "latifundista, latifundista" (big landowners) and then with vivid gestures showed me that he had been beaten by the police under Batista.

Dangerous Credentials

Police had already begun arriving and were breaking up the demonstration, chasing the demonstrators up the streets leading into the square. I saw the occupants of one station wagon angrily pulled out of their car by the police and roughed up, apparently for responding to the demonstrators with cries of "Cuba si; Russia no." After an angry scene the frightened motorists and their women folk were allowed to get back in their car and make off. I heard a shot from an adjoining street and ran over to see a crowd running along the cathedral with a policeman in pursuit. The demonstrators—mostly well dressed women— had hardly been dispersed when I saw a new crowd, this time of poorly dressed young men and a few girls rushing down the street toward the Cathedral, yelling "Cuba si; yanquis, no" (Cuba, yes; Yankees, no). The demonstration swept around me, and I ran with it back to the front of the Cathedral. The front steps had now been taken over by pro-government demonstrators. A young man was making a violent speech in Spanish of which I could not catch a word and before I could try and find out a crowd formed around me. A young man flashing some kind of official pass asked who I was and when I said "periodista, norteamericano" (North American journalist) he wanted to see credentials. All I had was my State Department correspondents' association card which with its gold American eagle looked uncomfortably official for use in that crowd. Nevertheless I showed it, curious to see what reaction would follow.

"Not Communist But Humanist"

The crowd closed in. A young girl pulled a Catholic medal out of her blouse and said, "I'm a good Catholic. I'm for Fidel. Those other people were counter revolutionaries." Another girl waved a copy of Giovanni Papini's Life of Christ in Spanish translation at me and said, "You see. I, too, am a good Catholic. But we are Fidelistas. We are humanists, not Communists." Everywhere in Cuba I found people resentful and defensive about the charge of being Communists. These demonstrators were no different. "We are not imperialists," one young man shouted at me. "We are not Communists. We are Cubans." Another young man pushed through angrily and shouted something about lies in the American press. "You write this down," he said peremptorily, pointing at my pad. "You write it down. We are not against the American people. We are only against your government." I wrote it all down. Another young man said, obviously about relations with the Soviet Union, "We want to be friends with everybody, slaves to nobody."

Police were pouring into the square, breaking up the counter demonstration too. A police car bore down on us, scattering my mass interview. I could see a little plaster saint hanging in front of the window of the police car. A militiaman and a young Negro who had helped me as a volunteer translator moved with me to the sidewalk. The young Negro turned out to be of Jamaican origin though Cuban born, which explained his English. "American newspapermen," he said, "never speak to plain people." While his friend, the militiaman looked on approvingly, he said "Come I show you how people live." I went along.

The Submerged Half in Havana

Thus began for me an informal Cook's tour of how the other half lives in Havana. The young Negro's English vocabulary was limited, his friend the militiaman's non-existent. The young Negro was named Raul King. Intelligence and sympathy shown unmistakably in his fine black face. He was a structural steel building worker, 20 years old. "When the revolution came," he explained, "I went back to school." He was in the seventh grade. I never did succeed in finding out what the militiaman did. His name was Fernando Almanares, a handsome friendly fellow. They began by taking me into a block of "solares." The name in Spanish means an ancestral mansion, built Latin style around a central patio open to the sun and sky, hence the "sol" (sun) in "solar". But in Latin American Spanish a "solar" (Pl. "solares") has come to mean a tenement house, because in Havana as in many other Latin American cities these town houses have been converted into tenements, human rabbit warrens in which there are as many families as rooms. The "solares" are everywhere, behind little shops on the streets and sandwiched in between other similar buildings used as commercial or professional offices. A major portion of Havana's population live in them.

We entered a doorway between two stores and found ourselves in a dimly lit, ill-smelling interior swarming with children. Ancient rugs or tapestries covered the entrances to each room. Inside one of the better rooms was a big bed, a refrigerator, an old sideboard, and a TV set, all quite clean considering the circumstances. In others, there were two beds separated by a curtain. On each floor there were two toilets, and a large stone tub with one spigot, the common water supply. There were holy pictures in most of the rooms we saw, occasional pictures of Cuba's hero of the war with Spain, José Marti, and pictures of Fidel Castro torn from newspapers. A small boy was doing his arithmetic lessons on an improvised desk in the light from the sky. On a second floor landing an old crone worked at a battered sewing machine. An elderly woman explained that her "solar" had 20 rooms with a family in each. The tenement had to raise a total of $150 a month. Some tenants, single men with small rooms, paid as little as $7.50 a month. Some families paid as much as $12 a month. There was one old woman who had been there for years and was still permitted to pay her old rent of $3 a month. Swarms of half-naked children followed our tour with fascination.

No Water Except From The Creek

The people who live in the *solares*, ill-lit and ill-smelling as these habitations may be, are not the poorest of the poor in Havana. They are still part of the city's life. In the mornings, going by in buses or taxis, one looks on with surprise to see

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***Next day Revolucion, organ of the July 26 movement, said the demonstrators had cried "Yanquis, si; Russia, no." This was untrue.**

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Unofficial Guided Tour of Havana's Slums and Squatter Shanty-Towns

(*Continued from Page Three*)

how the delectable girls pour out of these tenements looking miraculously clean and smart. The sharp division is between the tenement dweller and the thousands who live in the makeshift shanty towns which have sprung up over the past quarter century on the outskirts of Havana. These shanty towns are called *"barrios de indigentes"* or "indigent neighborhoods." My two guides took me to see the most notorious of these squatter settlements, "Los Yuagas." We took a taxi to a section of the city called Lugano Habana, drove down to the end of one street where open fields began, turned sharply right up a steep hill on what seemed to be little more than a goat's path and stopped on the crest. There, stretched below us on the hillside and down to a narrow valley through which a creek ran was a squatter settlement of makeshift one-story houses made of old tin cans, abandoned concrete blocks and palm fronds which are called "yaguas" whence the name of the settlement.

Children Almost As Naked As India's

As we started down the narrow pathways between the shanties, children gathered behind us almost as naked as those I had once seen in the streets of Bombay. The people of "Las Yaguas" unlike those of the *solares* we had visited seemed unfriendly and suspicious. The shanty town was built on the side of what is known as "Donkey's Hill" (Loma del Burro) and the only water supply was the creek down in the valley from which people brought up water in old cans. Goats were tethered outside some of the shanties. Here and there wash hung on lines. Many of the older children here as elsewhere among the poor in Cuba when they smiled showed empty gums where they had lost teeth; apparently this was the result of bad diet, lack of milk or other sources of calcium. We saw one lovely mulatto girl in rags, just budding into womanhood, but when she opened her mouth she was as toothless as an old hag. We stepped into several houses. All were one-room affairs with mud floors, holes in the wall for windows, and no facilities of any kind. Here and there in the settlement were tiny shanties set up as grocery stores and restaurants. We were shown one building of concrete blocks in which the shanty town's first school had been established since the revolution. There seemed to be about 1,000 shanties in "Las Yaguas" and in these the people lived rent free. It was explained to me that earlier in the days of Machado such people used to sleep in the streets and in doorways on old newspapers. As we left, a touching thing happened. A ragged little boy ran up with a handful of cigarettes as a gift for the visitors. We thanked him and left in a hail of warm "adios" from a mob of urchins.

On Last Week's Missing Issue

It proved impossible under the somewhat hectic circumstances to make copy in Cuba and get it back in time for the issue of July 25 and we were forced to skip it. We hope readers will understand and excuse.

The Numbers That Betokened Hope

I now come to what was at first a very tantalizing part of my story. The shanties all had numbers on them. One I marked down as a sample was "B 2—C 33—P 8." I thought at first this must be for the convenience of postmen, so they could tell one shanty from another in delivering mail. I asked my guides and they asked the children following us what the numbers were. The children said these were the numbers of the new houses being built by the government for them. We stopped and asked a woman occupant what the numbers on her shanty meant. She gave the same answer—this was the number of the new homes being prepared for them. The B denoted the block in which they would be located in the new settlement. A certain pride was evident in her answer, the pride of a prospective homeowner, the feeling of being a person about whom the government cared. But next day when I reported this to the public relations office at the Foreign Ministry and they took me to INAV, the public savings and housing corporation which is engaged in slum clearance and low cost home construction, nobody seemed to have heard of any such project to replace "Las Yaguas." I began to believe that the shanty town dwellers were the victims of false hopes.

(*To Be Concluded Next Week*)

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